

***TAGIADES NESTUS KORELA* MABILLE, 1891
(LEPIDOPTERA: HESPERIIDAE: PYRGINAE) FROM
MER ISLAND, TORRES STRAIT, QUEENSLAND**

S.S. BROWN¹, C.E. MEYER², R.P. WEIR³ and C.G. MILLER⁴

¹19 Kimberley Drive, Bowral, NSW 2576 (Email: stnac@bigpond.com)

²29 Silky Oak Avenue, Moggill, Qld 4070 (Email: cmameyer@bigpond.com)

³90 Horne Road, Bees Creek, NT 0822 (Email: Richard.Weir@nt.gov.au)

⁴37 Alison Ave, Lennox Head, NSW 2478 (Email: cgrantmiller@bigpond.com)

Abstract

Tagiades nestus korela Mabilie, 1891 is recorded from Mer (Murray) Island in Torres Strait for the first time. One male specimen was collected on 12 April 2015 flying on a track in monsoon forest near the centre of the island. *T. n. korela* is now known from three Torres Strait islands, viz. Dauan, Erub (Darnley) and Mer.

Introduction

Tagiades Hübner contains twelve species distributed from Africa to northern Australia (Parsons 1998, Braby 2000). In the Australian Region it is represented by three taxa, viz. *T. trebillius canonicus* Fruhstorfer, 1910, which is restricted to Papua New Guinea (Evans 1949), *T. nestus korela* Mabilie, 1891 and *T. japeus janetta* Butler, 1870, which are additionally found in Torres Strait and eastern tropical Queensland (Parsons 1998). *Tagiades* species prefer shaded areas and tracks beneath and adjacent to the forest canopy or mangroves, usually around areas where their larval host plant occurs (pers. obs.).

The first Australian specimen of *T. nestus* (C. Felder) was collected on Erub (Darnley) Island, Torres Strait in May 1910 by H. Elgner (Fig. 7) and is housed in the Australia Museum, Sydney. It was illustrated as *T. neira* Plötz, 1885 by Waterhouse and Lyell (1914). Although not illustrated in his later work, Waterhouse (1932) did make reference to this specimen as *T. neira*, belonging in the *T. nestus* species group. It was assigned to *T. nestus korela* by Common and Waterhouse (1972).

After this initial collection, there were no further records of this species from Australia until it was rediscovered, in April 2004, on Dauan Island, Torres Strait (Valentine and Johnson 2005). On that occasion the immature stages were also recorded, on climbing yam vines (*Dioscorea* sp.: Dioscoraceae). In April 2015, we conducted a butterfly survey on Mer, Dauan and Saibai Islands. While on Mer Island, a male *T. n. korela* (Figs 1-2) was observed and collected in monsoon forest in the central part of the island.

Mer Island lies in the far east of Torres Strait, roughly 120 km SE of Papua New Guinea at its closest point. Roughly circular in shape and approximately 2.8 km by 1.7 km in size, it is the result of Pleistocene era volcanic activity, with the major land formation behind the village consisting of a volcanic vent composed of poorly consolidated scoria and ash (Torres Strait Regional

Authority 2013). Thus, this part of the island is extremely porous and, with its associated severe drainage, limits the nature and abundance of vegetation growing on the western half of the island. The eastern half of the island is predominantly monsoon forest mixed with many introduced species and it is in this area that most butterflies were collected.

Discussion

Tagiades nestus korela is now known to occur on three islands in Torres Strait, viz. Dauan in the north and Mer and Erub in the east. Due to the widespread planting of yam vines on many of the Torres Strait islands and hundreds of years of inter-island trade between them and Papua New Guinea (Doug Passi and Barbara Waterhouse pers. comms.), it is feasible that individuals were transported to the islands as immatures on yam plants. It is also possible that the insect has existed on the islands since they were connected by a land bridge, when Torres Strait was a part of the Sahul shelf (Parsons 1998). *Tagiades japetus janetta* (Figs 3-6) is not known from Mer Island but the two species are sympatric on Dauan Island. In January 2011, one of us (CEM) collected a pupa on Dauan Island in a typical *Tagiades* shelter on *Dioscorea* sp., which emerged as *T. n. korela*. At the same time, within 300 metres of that spot, one of us (SSB) collected a *T. j. janetta* male (Figs 3-4). Based on our records, *T. j. janetta* is more widespread and observed more frequently on Dauan Island than *T. n. korela*.

The original Elgner specimen of *T. n. korela* is labelled as having passed through the C.W. Wyatt Theft Collection. This refers to the activities of Colin Wyatt, an English amateur entomologist who stole specimens from a number of Australian Museums (and the Natural History Museum in London) in the 1930s and 1940s. Wyatt appeared at Westham Magistrates Court in London in 1947 and was fined £100 when he pleaded guilty to the unlawful possession of a large number of Australian specimens. These were returned to Australia, where it was found that labels on a number of specimens had been removed or altered, presumably to conceal their provenance. All such specimens now bear yellow labels alerting researchers to the fact that they passed through Wyatt's hands and that labels may be inaccurate (John Tennent pers. comm.).

E.D. Edwards (pers. comm.) also provided information regarding the veracity of the label data on Elgner's historical specimen of *T. n. korela*, stating: 'The specimens stolen by Wyatt were returned to the South Australian Museum (which was also robbed of specimens by Wyatt) and the specimens belonging to the different Australian institutions sorted out by Norman Tindale. Waterhouse was too ill to travel to Adelaide to do it. While Waterhouse may have complained about some details of Tindale's sorting, he would have made sure such an historic specimen was returned to the Australian Museum with the right labels. The Elgner label is genuine, the date is right, the sex is right'.



Figs 1-7. *Tagiades* spp: (1-2) *T. nestus korela* from Mer Island: (1) upperside; (2) underside (forewing length 21 mm). (3-4) *T. japetus janetta* (Papua New Guinea form) from Dauan Island: (3) upperside; (4) underside (forewing length 22 mm). (5-6) *T. japetus janetta* from Thursdays Island, Torres Strait: (5) upperside; (6) underside (forewing length 21 mm). (7) *T. nestus korela* from Darnley Is, 15.v.[19]10, H. Elgner (Image source: Australia Museum: Russell Cox).

The tornus of the left hind wing has been repaired at some stage. This repair seems to have been done after the specimen was illustrated in Waterhouse and Lyell (1914) as the illustrated specimen is lacking the third black spot on the tornus of the left hind wing.

In spite of the Elgner specimen's journey and repairs, it seem safe to assume that the specimen in the Australian Museum is genuine as it was illustrated only four years after it was collected and the label (Fig. 5) appears consistent with other Elgner labels.

Thus, given the fresh condition of our specimen, the isolation of Mer Island and the abundance of the larval host plant on the island, the species is most likely established on the island.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Mr Doug Passi (Chairman of the Prescribed Bodies Corporate on Mer Island), Mr Joey Tapau (Biosecurity Officer, Mer Island) and the people of Mer Island for permission to visit and conduct the butterfly survey there. We thank Mr E.D. Edwards for information regarding the history and validity of the Elgner record of *T. n. korela* from Erub (Darnley) Island, John Tennent (Natural History Museum, London) for information regarding the C.W. Wyatt Theft Collection and Dr David Britton, Russell Cox and Jacque Recsei of the Australian Museum, Sydney for providing the digital image and contextual information relating to the 1910 H. Elgner record of *T. n. korela*. We also thank Dr Trevor Lambkin for his comments on the manuscript.

References

- BRABY, M.F. 2000. *Butterflies of Australia: their identification, biology and distribution*. CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood; xxvii + 976 pp.
- COMMON, I.F.B and WATERHOUSE, D.F. 1972. *Butterflies of Australia*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney; 498 pp, 41 pls.
- EVANS, W.H. *A catalogue of the Hesperiiidae from Europe, Asia and Australia in the British Museum (Natural History)*. British Museum (Natural History), London; 502 pp.
- PARSONS, M. 1998. *The butterflies of Papua New Guinea: their systematics and biology*. Academic Press, London; xvi + 736 pp, 162 pls.
- TORRES STRAIT REGIONAL AUTHORITY. 2013. Profile for management of the habitats and related ecological and cultural resource values of Mer Island. Available at: http://www.tara.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/4499/Mer_Biodiversity_Profile_January_2013.pdf
- VALENTINE, P.S. and JOHNSON, S.J. 2005. The rediscovery of *Tagiades nestus* (C. Felder) (Lepidoptera: Hesperiiidae: Pyrginae) in Australia. *Australian Entomologist* 32: 155-156.
- WATERHOUSE, G. 1932. *What butterfly is that?* Angus & Robertson, Sydney; viii + 291 pp, 34 pls.
- WATERHOUSE, G.A. and LYELL, G 1914 *The butterflies of Australia. A monograph of the Australian Rhopalocera*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney; vi + 239 pp.